

TALES OF MONO COUNTY

by
Arthur E. Larson

I cannot guarantee the accuracy of any of these stories--they are as I remember them from childhoods recollections.

Most of these scenes are laid in the Antelope Valley on the Walker River. The Valley is about 30 miles long and 5 miles wide, running north and south. Walker River enters from the south-east and leaves the valley at the north-east, dividing the valley almost in half with mountains on each side--some of which are the Sierra Nevada Range. These stories took place in the 1880's or early 1890's. I left the county in 1900.

FISH STORY

I remember when I was quite a small child an Indian came to the ranch. He was carrying or dragging a large fish on his shoulders. He had a rope tied around the fish's lower jaw. The tail of the fish dragged on the ground and behind him, as I remember it, making the fish about four or four and one -half feet long. These fish were called Salmon Trout. Apparently they were landlocked and came up the river from Walker Lake to spawn when the water was high.

The way they were caught--the Indians would build a sort of wickiup, or tent, with half of it over the water where the river eddied in. This tent was built in a conical fashion with no holes in it except on the land side where there was just a small hole for the fisherman to crawl in. The hole was barely large enough for me to crawl in. After the fisherman was in the small tent he covered the small opening with branches and twigs with leaves to shut out the light. Inside the wickiup it was almost as dark as night--the

only light would be from the water itself. This was to fool the fish, you might say--they would stop in the dark eddy to rest and the Indian would spear him with a spear or large hook, fastened to a large pole. It is reasonable to presume these fish were what we now call cut-throat trout, They may be extinct now.

JOE PETE

This happened in about 1895 or a year or so before. Joe Pete was a renegade Indian and liked liquor. (Indians and the liquor didn't mix at all.) Whenever an Indian got drunk he was a bad Indian no matter how good an Indian he was before. Joe Pete was working for the Danburg Family in Carson Valley. One Sunday evening after coming back from town, probably drunk, Joe Pete went into the cook shack and shot and killed one of the young Danburg boys and of course became an outlaw hunted by the whites. He was hunted almost all one summer. The Indians wouldn't give him up. Finally surrounded, and as he came out to surrender to the whites, Joe's brother-in-law, another Indian, shot Joe rather than have him captured by the white men.

While Joe Pete was being hunted, Piute Sam was working for my Father. Everyone was discussing the hunt for Joe Pete and why they should hunt for him. To show the humor of the Indians-- I remember Piute Sam saying one day: "Well he didn't kill a white man, He killed a Dutchman."

CAPTAIN JIM

Jim

Captain/evidently was a high captain of certain tribes. I suppose we would him a "Governor." He had a certain territory that he claimed as his special privilege to watch over a certain bunch of Indians. Evidently a great deal of this Antelope Valley especially on the east side, was under his domain or his surveillance. All the Indians that lived in that section and the land bordered on it were under his control. They consisdered it as Captain Jim's land. It was almost like the feudal system of Europe--the landlords owned all and the peasants under him were subject to his command. Every thing that was taken from the land, fish, game, pine nuts or any crop that was harvested were all controlled by Captain Jim. This man was a Piute.

When the whites moved in and were settling on homesteads, they took this land irrespective of the rights of Indians. They considered the Indians had no rights--the land belonged to the government and they were going to settle on it on their own. Captain Jim was quite an orator in his way. He resented the white people being there, resented their taking the land and driving out the deer and antelope, catching fish, and killing rabbits. There were a few wild horses but the whites drove them out. Old Captain Jim used to come to the house and would start out in a fashion of an orator gesticulating with his hands. Saying "All this is my land (waving his hands in every direction--taking in as far as eye could see.)" "White man kill off deer, catch all the fish, catch all the Jack Rabbits." He would end up by saying: "Tom Rickey no give me biscuit. ~~Then~~ he made a plea: "You give me biscuit?" (Tom Rickey as the rich man of the valley, owning thousands of acres of land and thousands of cattle.) The Indians always have a decided accent on the word denoting the person addressed. Captain Jim was 60 or 70 years old at this time.

FRANK

If Frank had any other name I do not know what it was. I always think of him as "Frank the Surveyor." He was Washo. I remember he delivered our supplies on foot, which was pretty hard as the mountain was steep. The supplies were delivered to a gang of us fellows working in a mine. As we looked down from the cabin where we were quartered, slept and ate, we'd often see Frank coming up the trail. Every little way he would stop and motion with his hands as if surveying out a road, as if he pointed out a direction a road would take so he could ride up there on a horse rather than walk up a steep trail.

We used to ask Frank a lot of questions. He told me the first white man he'd ever seen in the valley was John C. Fremont or one of his men. I asked him how big he was when Fremont came through the valley. "Well," he said, "I was a chiquillo papoose." (Meaning very small little one.) I asked him what he remembered about Fremont. He said he didn't remember but the big noises at evening--evidently when they shot their cannon at sundown. That was the first time white men had ever been in that part of the country. This trip was probably Fremont's 1846 trip to California.

Fremont was evidently trying to find a route to cross the Sierras by way up the Walker River. He came in from the north trying to find Walker Pass. Finding he couldn't go up the river, he bore to the right, which was towards the Sierras, and ran into blind canyon. His scouts evidently found the Sonora Pass. This blind canyon they had come to was impossible to get out the way they were going. A storm came up and the party wintered in that canyon. It now called Lost Cannon Canyon.

Years afterward people found a brass cannon Fremont had left, chains, iron cannon balls, wagon, ox yokes, et. My father and mother used the cabins his men built years afterwards, and had a table made from one of their wagon beds. We also had a wagon jack Fremont had left there. It was on the ranch when we left Antelope in 1900. I would like to know what became of it, but have no idea.

I do not know whether Fremont wintered the entire winter or not.
I have no knowledge of when he came/^{out}of the canyon. Anyway, if he had known, they could have crossed the Walker River further down, traveled southeast and gotten out of the rugged country.

The crossing where Fremont's party crossed the river is marked today by a plaque put there by the Native Sons. I remember you could trace the crossing very distinctly when I was a boy, and the marks of his wagons being pulled almost straight up the mountain. They must have been dragged some way by main force because the mountains were so steep it was impossible for horses to go up straight.

A large bunch of keys hanging on the wall of the Wiley house always interested me as a boy. I wanted very much to see that bunch of keys and one day they were handed off the wall to me. Among them was a key with "U.S. Mail" marked on it. In later years I knew that it was a key to a mail pouch. That bunch of keys was picked up in the road and had supposedly been lost by the bandit Black Bart, who was notorious at that time in robbing stages. The road Wileys lived on was the regular mail road between Bodie, Aurora and Carson City, Nevada. Bodie and Aurora shipped their bullion out to Carson to the mint. Sometimes along this road Black Bart and others of the same caliber would rob the stage and sometimes hold up the passengers, but what they were after mostly was the registered mail and express box.

One robbery took place between Wellington Station and Sulphur Spring Ranch at a point where the stage had to climb a four-mile hill very slowly. Right at the beginning of this hill was a very steep water course (dry most of the time). This was quite a steep drop and of course the stages slowed almost to a stop. This was a favorite place for holdups. There it was that Messenger Toby shot and killed one bank robber--was himself shot, wounded by the other robber. The driver, I believe was killed. Toby got on one of the stage horses and went for help a few miles away. In this absence someone highjacked the robbers and got away with the cash. Toby was quite anxious about his connection with this robbery. It might have been quite serious with this highjacker. This highjacker was so fearful about his connection with this robbery that he kept a horse saddled night and day for several months to move quickly in case anything got too hot for him. Whether this holdup was by Black Bart, I don't think it was ever known. Anyway one of the

robbers got away and was never caught unless it was Black Bart.

Close to Coleville in the cliffs about 500 feet above the river is a flag pole. This pole was set up the fourth of July, 1876, by my father and two other gentlemen--a Mr Connell who was a confederate soldier, and a third man whom I have forgotten, and the American flag hoisted. The pole was still there the last I know.

Note: The people of Antelope were celebrating the Centennial of Independence Day with a giant picnic, speeches, etc. and needed a high place from which to fly the flag.

My father, Wood Larson, was born in Norway. He came to America in 1848--crossed the plains in 1859 from Wisconsin. He settled first in the Sacramento Valley, somewhere near what is known as Sutter Basin. (According to Owen Larson, the ranch was near Stockton, still in the delta of the rivers, however. EAL, 1964). He lost all of his stock and all his crops in one of the Sacramento floods. (winter of 1862 when 108 inches of rain fell in Sonora. (See Brewer's UP AND DOWN CALIFORNIA, EAL 1964). Then he went to Franktown, Washoe County, Nevada near Bower's Mansion (knew Bowers well) where he and my mother, Mary Jane Owens (had nothing to do with the naming of Owens Valley) married in 1868 and migrated to Antelope Valley that same year.

Mother and her brother Frank acted as practical nurses during a diphtheria epidemic. We were 50 miles from any doctor. Lots of children died in this epidemic.

My maternal Grandfather was Captain of the wagon train crossing the plains in 1860. Mother was a native of Missouri. Her folks were a mixture of Scotch, Irish, and French. Great Grandmother was a cousin of Henry Clay. Grandfather came to California from Missouri in 1852--made three trips across the plains. The first trip was by way of Panama--brought the family West in 1860.

The Washo Indians claimed the west side of the valley. The Piutes claimed the east side. For many years neither side would let the other side cross the River. We lived on the east side of the River so we were more on the Piute side. Later that rule was broken by Piute Sam taking a Washo squaw or "Mahala" as a wife, but that was just before the time of my earliest recollections, about 1886. Before that, they did not intermarry. Each tribe kept to themselves.

I remember in about 1890 of the Piutes and Washoes having 20 mile foot races that were run on the east side of the valley, so the restrictions on their coming back and forth would have been done away with. This foot relay race was run from what was called the Old Wellington Station between Antelope Valley and Smith Valley on the River and the goal was to my Father's Ranch. The Indians went on horseback the day before the race and set the flags or poles out to mark where the marath-on would be run. The runners were confined somewhere in the neighborhood of these poles or posts. I remember very distinctly that the side that lost the race was quite indignant about it, claiming the other side had put poison on the stakes causing them to lose the race. I am not sure whether the Piutes or the Washoes won.

RICHARD GASSAWAY WATKINS

Richard Gassaway Watkins, postmaster of Coleville, was a native of Maryland. He was a sailor, lawyer, Indian fighter and gentleman. Watkins was with Commordore Sloat when he took Monterey from the Mexicans. He was the man who climbed the pole to hang the flag on the Monterey Presidio. He was also with the early Californians at the Sonoma Mission and was instrumental in winning California for the United States. He was one of the men that originated the California Bear Flag.

Later on when Watkins went to Eastern California or Western Nevada he was an Indian fighter. He fought in several of those battles around Pyramid Lake--led in the fight in Pyramid Lake country where the whites were badly defeated.

He was a cousin of Colonel Bowie of Alamo fame and the inventor of the Bowie knife.

Being from Maryland he was a southern sympathizer. He tried to lead Nevada into secession, or worked with the people who were trying to lead Nevada into secession, during the Civil War, and served time in the Federal prison which was at Fort Churchill at that time, because of his leanings toward southern confederacy.

He later became a lawyer (he had read some law books and was qualified to practice law in the Justice Courts) and was called Judge Watkins. He had been quite a rowdy in his early days, drinking and carousing a good deal, but during some of the early revival upheavals in that country he converted and became a member of the church and a worker in the parish. He was well remembered and well thought of and a very good friend of the family.

Note: His early Indian fighting can be found in the early editions of the History of Nevada and his connection with Sloat and early California history can be found in the "California Bear".

somewhere about 1904--they gave almost an entire edition (issue) to his history.

Watkins died in Coleville, where he had lived for years, in about 1908.

I failed to mention he had only one leg. He had no children, although he married a widow with several children. One of these children is ^{*}Mrs. Arthur Pitts, still living in Antelope Valley.

Along in 1872 a bunch of convicts escaped from the Nevada State prison. Among them was a man who had sworn vengeance on the judge and jury that tried him. He swore if he ever got out he would take vengeance on them. One of the jurors who tried this fellow was an Express rider carrying dispatches from Bodie and Aurora to Carson City. Nevada. When these convicts escaped, this Pony Express Rider heard of it and knew that his life wouldn't be worth anything if he met up with these men on his ride, so, thinking that all would be well if he sent his son in his place, he sent the boy who about 16 or 17 years old to ride his route between Sweetwater and Wellington. About half way in the ride these convicts met the Pony Express and shot the boy, put him into a pine tree and set fire to the tree (this being along in the evening) just below the Sulphur Springs ranch of Robert Wiley. They came to Wiley's place and demanded supper. He realized who they were, however I don't think he knew any of them personally. He turned the house over to them, did his chores and came back and got their supper. Wiley's family was away at the time. The escaped convicts went south and into the Owens Valley country where a number were captured and at least three hung.

*Probably has since passed away

In about 1890 my Father rented a piece of ground to a couple of Chinamen who were raising vegetables for market. The Chinamen's house was about one-half mile from our house as I remember it. AS most of the Chinamen did in those days they liked to gamble and I suppose bootleg liquor to the Indians. This one Sunday afternoon the Chinamen had been entertaining some of their Indian friends and in all probability had won some money from them. One of them, on leaving picked up a shot gun and shot one of the Chinamen. The second Chinaman came to our house in the evening, after dark, to report the accident. (As a small youngster I enjoyed going to the door to see who was there.) When the knock came I went to the door to receive the Chinaman. I will never forget the condition he was in. He had blood and brains from head to foot. I was badly scared.

My Father and brothers went immediately to the scene of the shooting and found out who the Indian was. The next day the officers traced the Indian across the Stateline into Nevada and persuaded him to come back to Mono County where they could arrest him. He was arrested, tried and sent to Folsom. Two or three weeks after he was confined to Folsom he attempted to escape by swimming a river and he was killed by guards.

The killing of this Chinaman and this Indian in Folsom led to an incident which might have terminated into quite serious trouble. The Indians resented the fellow being captured and especially the idea of his being brought from Nevada to California to be arrested.

TALES OF INDIANS I KAVE KNOWN

LAME BOB

Lame Bob was like a minstrel. Something I don't know what, had happened to him in his younger life and one leg was about four inches shorter than the other. He walked with a seven or eight foot pole rather than a crutch. He used the pole in both hands and walked along leaning heavily on the pole. He was a great hand to play the Harmonica and Jew's Harp. He used to amuse the white children with his harp, almost like an organ grinder, except I never knew him to pass the hat. Lame Bob migrated through the country. I suppose probably he begged for coins although I do not know-- I never saw him ask for anything.

Possibly the women of the community gave him handouts as he went along, but he was very friendly with the small children and amused them with his playing. I would judge him to be about 35 years old, although it is hard to tell the age of an Indian. I don't know what happened to him--he just left the country or possibly died.

BIG MOUTH JIM

Big Mouth Jim used to come begging at the door. He would come to the window and put his hands at the side of his face, put his face close to the glass and peer through the window. We never did get used to seeing Indian faces at the windows. I have heard Mother scream many times when Big Mouth Jim came to the window.

As his name indicates, Big Mouth Jim was a very homely Indian. He had a mouth stretching from ear to ear or so it seemed. I never knew him to be mean, but he would always strongly "request" something to eat. In those days, in the country, we had no shades at the windows.

Big Mouth Jim claimed to be sort of Captain of the Indian tribe-- I do not know whether he was a Washo or Piute.